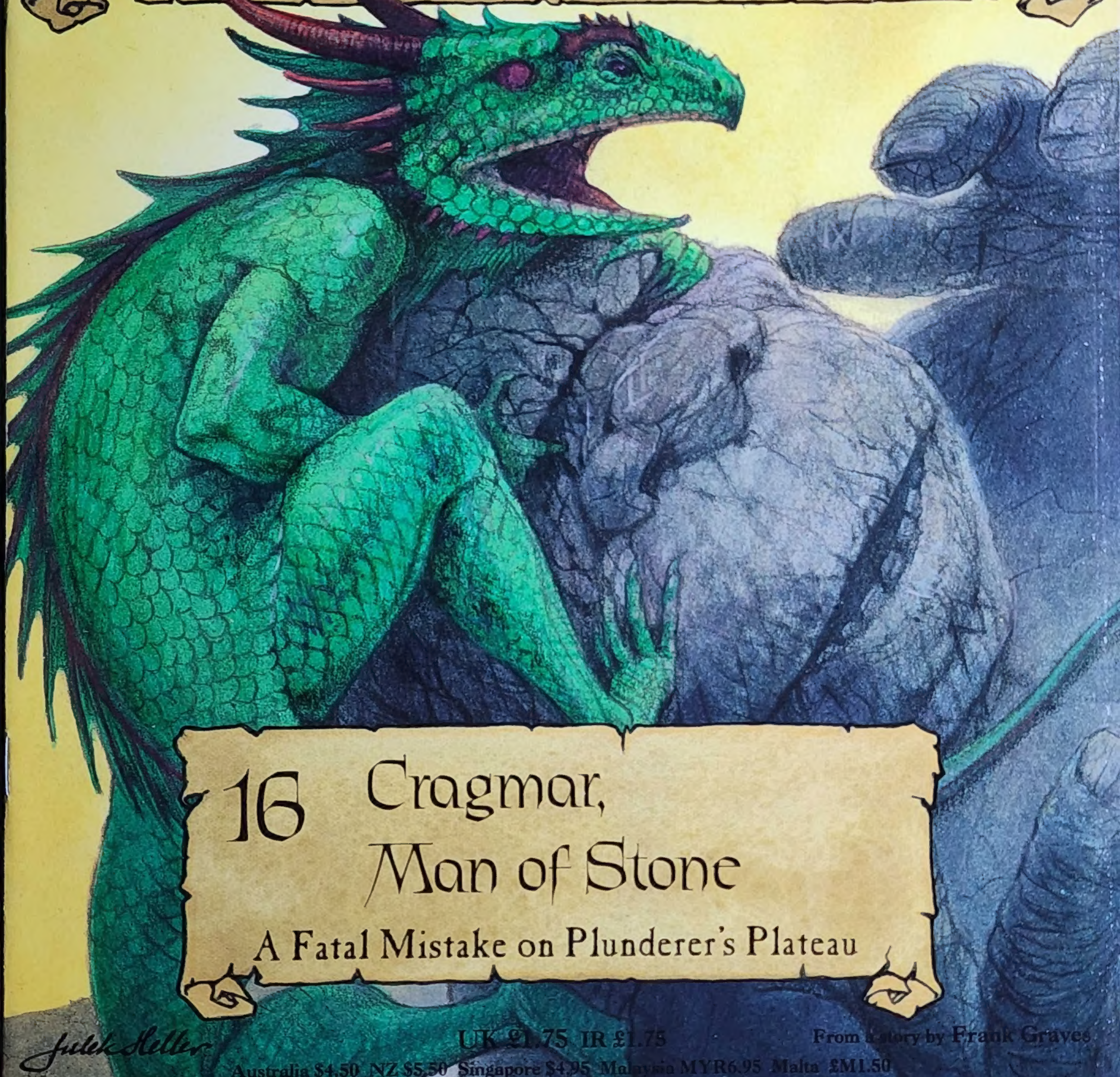
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION 16 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



16 Cragmar, Man of Stone

A Fatal Mistake on Plunderer's Plateau

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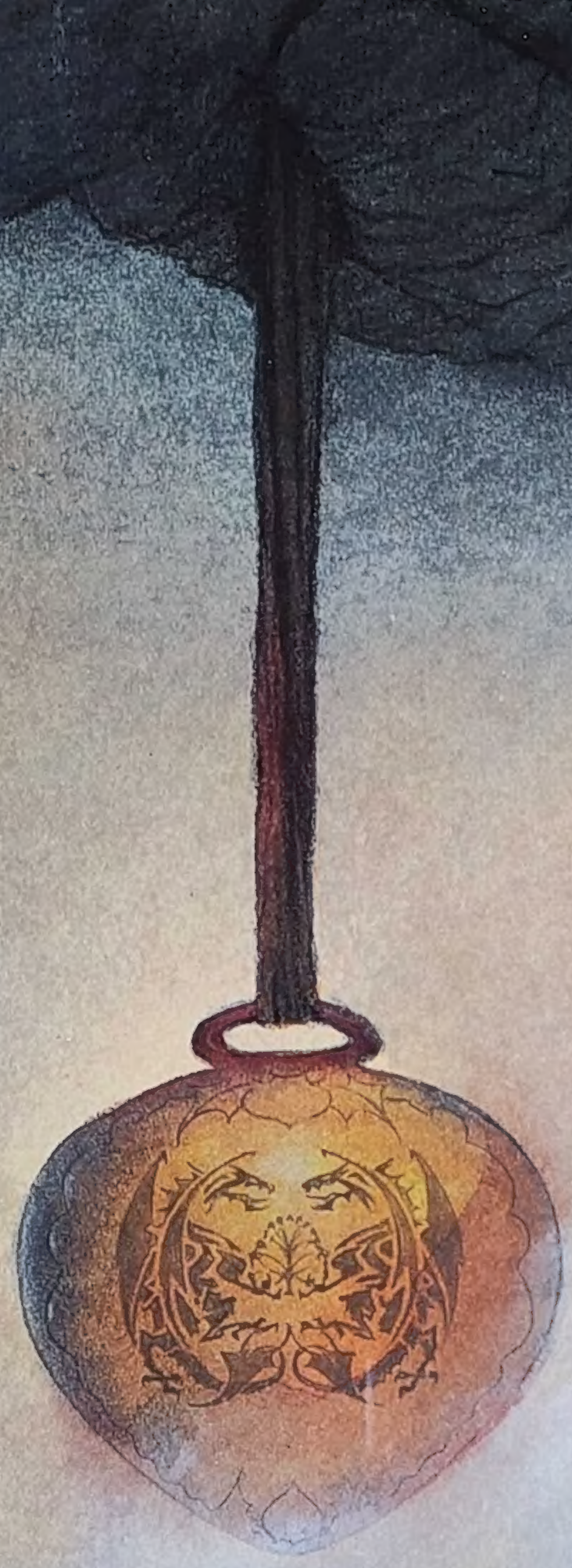
From a story by Frank Graves

Julek Heller

On the Sixteenth Day . . .

A treasure burned needs water thrice,
A friend regained will cross it twice,
But water once brings danger near.
The rocks themselves a source of fear.
A rolling stone unlocks the jail,
Flight from there to no avail.
Cunning holds the key to all,
Death comes from a final fall.



The flames swept up and over Richard, wrapping him in a pillar of fire. Although the blast was too brief to burn him, he jumped back faster than he had ever moved in his life. When the flames began to die down, Richard gingerly picked his way back into the smouldering embers, scraping through the sooty mess with the tip of his dagger.

He searched and searched but found nothing. Richard began to despair, then he spotted something hanging from a charred bough on a nearby tree. It was Golan's amulet. The blast had sent it flying into the air and it had caught in a deep groove. He reached up for it. It was still hot, so he hoisted it on to his dagger, and retreated to where Melek and Orkan were waiting.

When the amulet was cool enough to handle, Richard used a corner of his tunic to clean it up. It seemed different. There was no spark on the amulet's surface. Had it been ruined by the fire? Richard put it in his pocket, praying that it might regain its old power later.

The trio moved on. Soon the forest began to thin, and before them a river

crashed and thundered through a series of rocky rapids. Although the current was fast, it flowed between large, flat-topped boulders that made perfect stepping stones. The three crossed the rapids, and regrouped on a boulder on the opposite bank. While the trio dried off, Melek read aloud from the *Book of Prophecies*.

Underground prison

"Hmm," Richard mused as Melek hoisted the book back on to his shoulders, "if I'm right, crossing water three times should bring both the amulet and Orkan back to normal."

"Help!" A voice called from nearby. Richard looked around but saw nothing.

"Help me!" the plea came again. "I'm trapped under the rock."

Richard slid down from the boulder. Between the base of the rock and the ground, gaped a narrow crevice.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

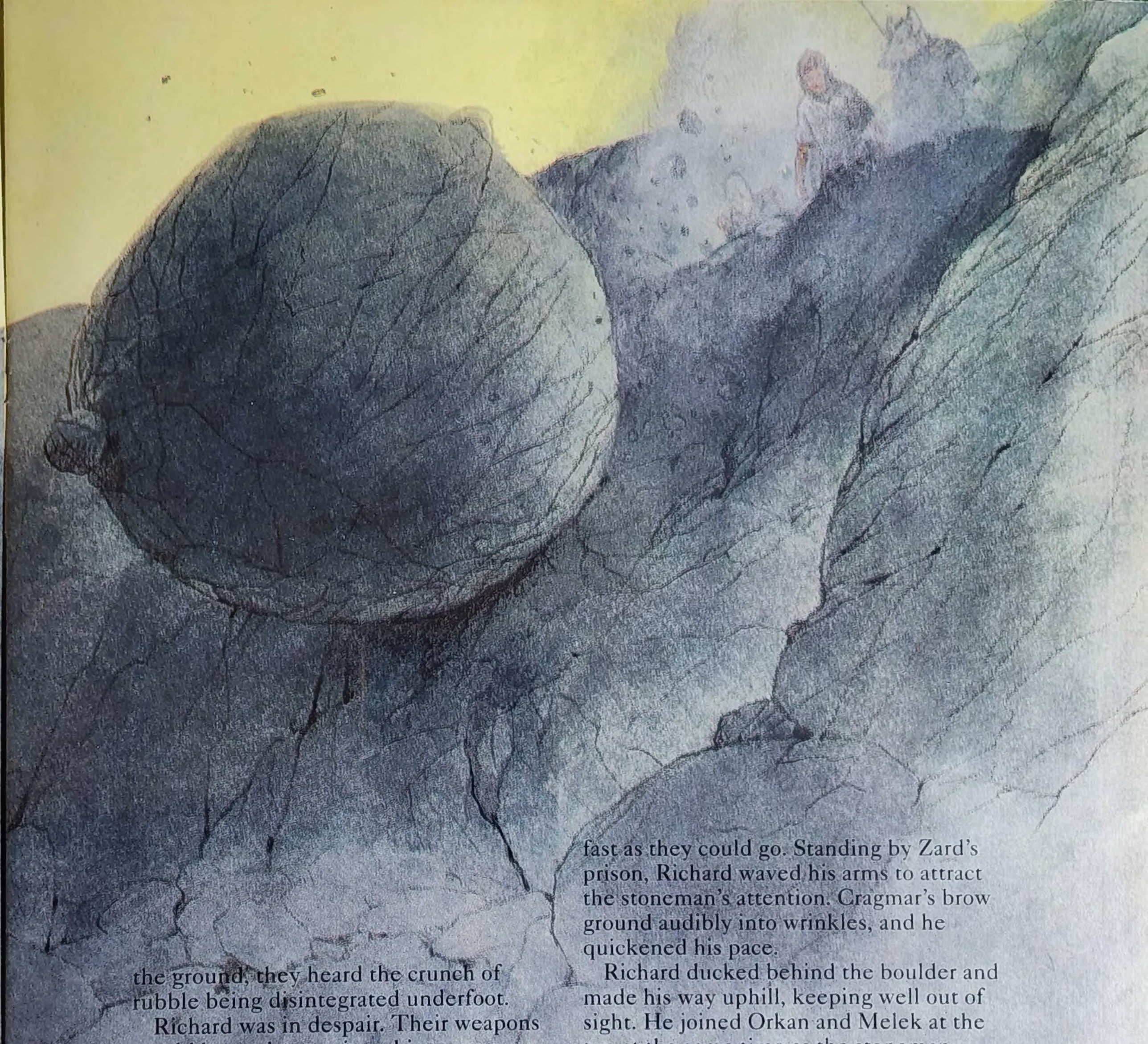
"I'm Zard, Guardian of the Reptiles," came the answer. "The Evil One trapped me here. Can you get me out?"

Another Guardian, Richard thought with relief, and without a trace of doubt in his mind, he called back, "I'll see if we can get the opening unblocked."

The three pushed against the boulder, trying to widen the gap. It did not budge. Then they tried to prise the boulder up, using a length of driftwood as a lever. The wood simply snapped. As they wondered what to try next, the earth shook beneath them with a deep rumble. Downriver, the steep bank was beginning to crumble, sending an avalanche of stones splashing into the water.

From deep in the rockface, an enormous figure was struggling to free itself. It thrashed about, clawing at the rock with massive limbs until it finally stood in the open. It was a gigantic man made entirely of stone. His craggy features swivelled about before fixing on the companions. Then he grinned.

From where they stood, the trio could hear the grating sound as the stoneman's cheeks creased. He began to walk towards them. Every time his monstrous feet hit



the ground, they heard the crunch of rubble being disintegrated underfoot.

Richard was in despair. Their weapons would be useless against this creature. They could only run.

"Never mind me!" Zard shouted from beneath the boulder. "Get away from Cragmar. He's here to stop me getting out. He won't touch me so long as I'm still in the Evil One's prison. Save yourselves!"

As Richard's mind raced, he had an inspiration. Above them, at the top of the bank, loomed a large boulder, balanced on three tiny rocks. A slight shove might send it rolling down the slope.

"Get to the top, quickly!" he shouted.

Melek and Orkan started up the slope as fast as they could go. Standing by Zard's prison, Richard waved his arms to attract the stoneman's attention. Cragmar's brow ground audibly into wrinkles, and he quickened his pace.

Richard ducked behind the boulder and made his way uphill, keeping well out of sight. He joined Orkan and Melek at the top at the same time as the stoneman reached Zard's prison. While Cragmar searched about in confusion, Richard hurriedly explained his plan to the others.

Uphill pursuit

Cragmar raised his pebbly eyes and saw his foe, trying to hide under a large boulder at the top. Cragmar frowned, then he started up after them.

When the stoneman was halfway up the slope, Richard shouted a command.

"One! Two! Three! Heave!" The boulder came free and thundered down

the slope, heading straight for Cragmar. There was no way the stoneman could escape being smashed to rubble. Then at the last moment the boulder hit a rocky outcrop and bounced slightly off-course. It skimmed past Cragmar, and continued down to the river.

Breaking free

Even in failure, Richard's plan had an unexpected success. As the boulder smashed its way downhill, it struck Zard's prison, shattering the rock that trapped him, before plunging into the rapids. When the dust cleared, Richard saw a slither of movement. A large lizard bounded from the debris and ran uphill towards him.

Cragmar saw none of this. The shock of his narrow escape had made him lose his footing and tumble to the ground. When he picked himself up, he had eyes only for his three enemies. In his single-minded fury, he was oblivious to the dark shape that darted past him through the undergrowth.

High-speed chase

Only when he saw Zard standing beside the others, did Cragmar realize what had happened. He let out a bellow of anger and crashed heavily towards the fugitives. The chase had started in earnest.

Zard led the way, urging the others to follow him as he leaped nimbly over the plateau. For a while they made good progress, using the advantage of high ground to lengthen the gap between them and Cragmar.

When the stoneman reached the top, the tables turned. Although Zard on his own could have easily outrun him, the Guardian was hampered by his new allies who could not keep up the pace. More and more frequently he found himself having to

stop to let them catch up. Every time Zard stopped, Cragmar gained ground. Zard knew that they could never win in a straight race. He would have to change tactics.

"This way!" he shouted, swerving off.

The others stumbled after Zard. When they realized where they were going, even Richard wondered whether Zard had made the right decision. The Guardian was heading at full tilt towards a steep ravine.

"It's a dead end!" Richard panted, skidding to a halt by the cliff edge.

He could see no way down the precipice and Cragmar was storming ever closer. The ground shook and small rocks began to tumble from the lip of the ravine.

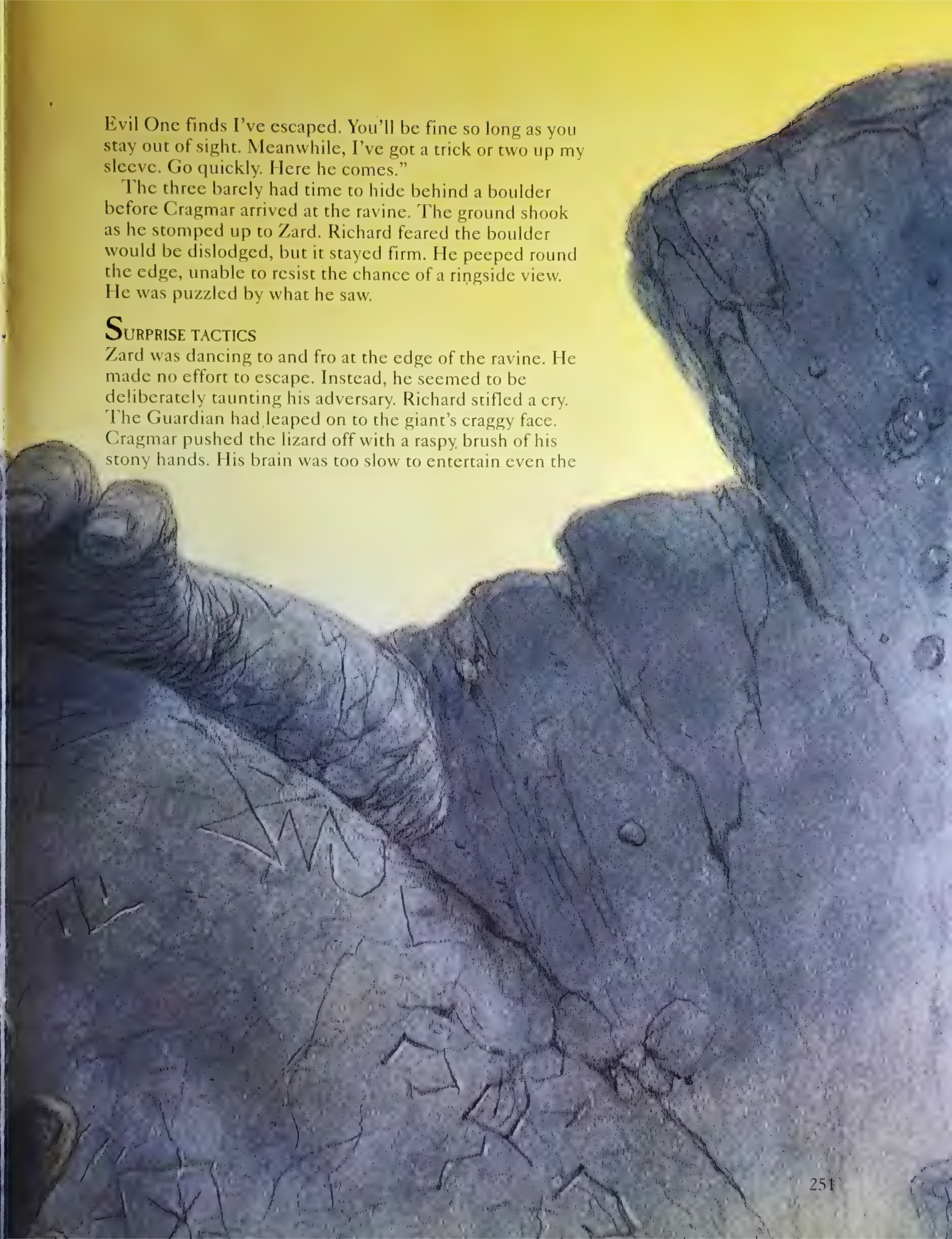
"Get under cover!" Zard commanded. "Don't mind Cragmar. He'll come after me first because he'll be in big trouble if the

Evil One finds I've escaped. You'll be fine so long as you stay out of sight. Meanwhile, I've got a trick or two up my sleeve. Go quickly. Here he comes."

The three barely had time to hide behind a boulder before Cragmar arrived at the ravine. The ground shook as he stomped up to Zard. Richard feared the boulder would be dislodged, but it stayed firm. He peeped round the edge, unable to resist the chance of a ringside view. He was puzzled by what he saw.

Surprise tactics

Zard was dancing to and fro at the edge of the ravine. He made no effort to escape. Instead, he seemed to be deliberately taunting his adversary. Richard stifled a cry. The Guardian had leaped on to the giant's craggy face. Cragmar pushed the lizard off with a raspy brush of his stony hands. His brain was too slow to entertain even the



idea of puzzlement. He knew who his enemy was, and he knew that he was near enough to catch him, and that was all that mattered. He reached out a rocky fist and grabbed for the lizard.

Caught by the tail

Zard evaded Cragmar's clumsy swipe with ease. Cragmar tried again, and again Zard sprang to safety. The stoneman closed in, his features shedding a fine powder of ground stone as they furrowed in concentration. For a third time, he snatched at the Guardian, and again Zard evaded the fist. This time, however, Zard had miscalculated.

While Cragmar's right hand had been reaching for Zard, his left had been moving forward in anticipation of his enemy's next move. When Zard jumped, Cragmar's left hand was ready. It closed tightly on the Guardian's tail. The lizard gave a quick flip of his body and sprang over the edge of the ravine, leaving his tail in the stoneman's fist. Richard gaped. It would be the turn of the trio next.

Cragmar was horrified too. One second he had been victorious, the next he had been left with nothing but a bloody stump of tail that slapped and writhed in his grasp. He stamped in outrage, roaring his fury to the skies. Then Cragmar flung the tail aside and launched himself over the cliff in pursuit of his foe.

Death plunge

A mighty crash echoed out of the ravine. There was a rattling hiss, as if a truckload of gravel had been emptied on the ground. A cloud of rock dust billowed up from the chasm and hung motionless before it was carried away on the breeze.

The three crept out from behind the boulder and looked over the edge. Far below, at the bottom of the ravine, an outline of rubble was all that was left of the stoneman. Cragmar was dead.

The trio looked at one another. Where was Zard? As if in answer to the unspoken question, a tail-less shape scurried across Cragmar's remains and darted back to the cliff. The three heard the sound of scrabbling. Zard levered himself over the edge and ran across to them.

Reptile's ruse

"How did you escape?" Melek asked the Guardian. "We thought you were dead!"

"I knew Cragmar was stupid enough to follow me wherever I went," Zard replied. "Luckily, being a lizard, I can jump anywhere and not be hurt. What I didn't foresee was that he'd get my tail, but it doesn't matter, I'll soon grow another. I must get my weapon back, though, and I know exactly where Cragmar hid it."

The Guardian scrambled nimbly over the lip

of the ravine and was soon hidden from view. While Zard was away, Richard checked the Path Finder. It pointed to a green swathe of forest that showed itself beyond the far edge of the plateau on which they stood. Richard put the instrument back in his bag.

Evil temptation

Orkan seemed to be uninterested in the proceedings. He stared glassily into the distance. "They will never know. You are safe with me." The soothing words wafted through Orkan's head as he fumbled with Dragora's pendant. "Pay no attention to these others. Their concerns are not yours, their aims are not yours. They are foolish. You are wise. You need have no fear. Death is the only umpire. Victory given only to those chosen survivors. You are my Chosen One."

Orkan suddenly began to smile. Then the words of a rhyme kept repeating themselves over and over in his head.

"Blood runs through the thickest lake,
Blood that makes the Gator wake,
Blood that others want to make,
Blood, the thirst that you can slake,
Blood that makes for no mistake,
Blood the prize that you can take.
Blood! The blood of those you hate!"

Richard watched through slitted eyes as Orkan drifted further and further into his own private world. The soldier thought he was unwatched and made no effort to conceal the emotions that flashed across his face. Richard had just decided to confront Orkan, when a noise came from the ravine.

The final fall?

It started as a series of squeaks followed by a deep groan. The groan developed into a tumultuous thunder that he knew all too well. The ground shook beneath his feet as another avalanche rocked the plateau. This time it came from the section of cliff down which Zard had disappeared.

Richard thought of the prophecy. "Death comes with a final fall." He had imagined it referred to Cragmar. He stared downhill, and shuddered. What if it referred to Zard?

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

The friendly pair are still on the Trail. Watch out for them somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.

In issue 15, Shoomi and Shoobi were peeping out of the inside front cover.

3-Minute Challenge

Zard's Battleaxe

The Guardian's trusty weapon is concealed in one of the illlustrations in this issue. Can you find it in less than three minutes?

In issue 15, there were 83 flies covering Richard's hand and arm. Did you manage to count them all?

Monsters and Magic

Read about the Golem and David and Goliath on Morbane's story cards. Which of these characters do you think Cragmar is based on?

In issue 15, Narkum, the Fly King, was based on the small spirit spies, the Nomatotlos.

The Ancestral Trail

Cut off the final section of the role-playing game instructions booklet, and fold in half. Put this section inside the first section so that the pages are correctly numbered from 1 to 8. Stretch an elastic band around the folds to hold the two cards together.

The six Pod and Intercept cards will appear shortly. In the meantime read the instructions carefully so that you are ready to play **The Ancestral Trail** as soon as you get them. If you want to play sooner, use small pieces of paper to represent the Pods and Intercept cards.

More tokens and location recorders will appear in future issues.

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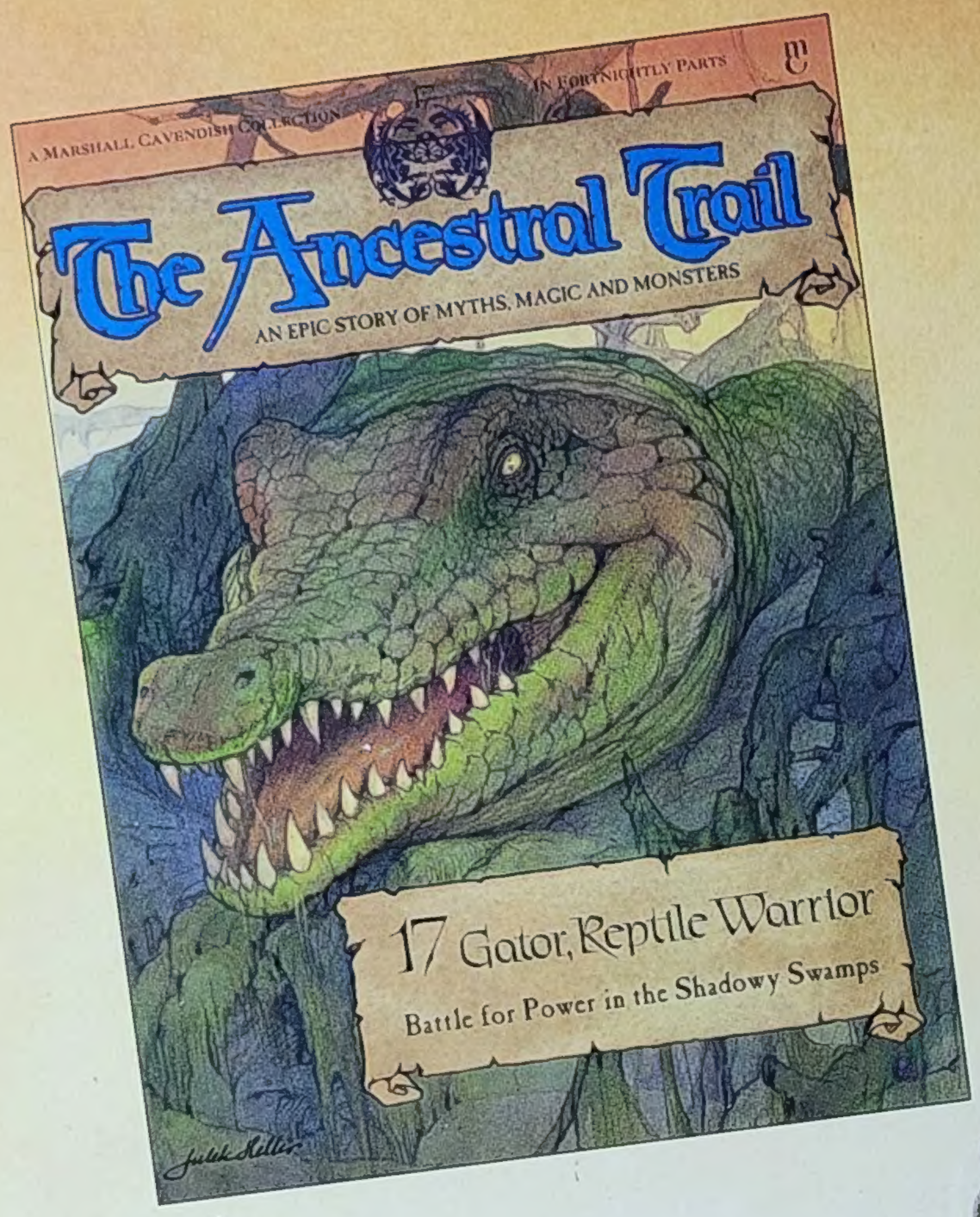
A Marshall Cavendish Collection
In Fortnightly Parts
The Ancestral Trail
An Epic Story of Myths, Magic and Monsters
17 Gator, Reptile Warrior
Battle for Power in the Shadowy Swamps

In Issue 17

Gator, Reptile Warrior

On the trail of a Pod in the Shadow Swamps, the trio get covered in huge blood-sucking leeches, then come face-to-face with a vicious reptile warrior.

plus

- Morbane tells about two legendary reptiles that command great respect.
- Two more puzzle pieces.

Coming in Issue 18

Kronis, the Winged Lion

Danger awaits the companions as they drift out to open sea. Stone Fish Island comes into view, but will they find a welcome there?

plus

From Morbane – two stories about creatures who feast on human flesh

- More tokens and a location recorder for the role-playing game.

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